**Five Questions Teachers Ask About Spelling**

An Interview with J. Richard Gentry, Ph.D., author of  
*Spel...Is a Four-Letter Word  
  
My Kid Can't Spell!  
  
Spelling Connections  
  
Spell It-Write!*

Zaner-Bloser editor Marytherese Croarkin met with spelling expert J. Richard Gentry in Texas to discuss issues in spelling education. The text that follows, a transcript of part of the interview, presents Dr. Gentry's answers to five questions teachers often ask about teaching spelling. (Dr. Gentry has provided references and research citations where appropriate.)  
  
  
In addition to being a Zaner-Bloser author, J. Richard Gentry is an educational consultant, speaker, researcher, and author of books on spelling for teachers and parents. He has lectured and presented seminars to thousands of teachers across North America. Currently he is on assignment with Heinemann Workshops, Zaner-Bloser Educational Publishers, the non-profit Children's Literacy Foundation, Rigby's Professional Development Inservice Courses for Literacy, and The Skyhooks Group. He also works with hundreds of school districts as a teacher educator and staff developer.  
  
  
An elementary education graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Dr. Gentry taught third, fourth, and fifth grade in Charlottesville, Virginia, before completing his Ph.D. in Reading Education at the University of Virginia. For seventeen years, he was professor of elementary education and reading at Western Carolina University where he directed the reading center. He has written numerous articles and the celebrated book, *Spel...Is a Four-Letter Word.*  
  
  
That book, and his recent books, *Teaching Kids to Spell* and *My Kid Can't Spell!*, are available from Heinemann Educational Press. Dr. Gentry is author of Zaner-Bloser's *Spelling Connections* program for grades 1-8 and Zaner-Bloser's *Spell It-Write!* program for grades K-6.  
  
  
Dr. Gentry has been a consultant and conference speaker throughout the U.S. and in Canada, Australia, South America, Europe, and the West Indies. In the past two years, he has worked with teachers in twenty-six states to help promote better instructional practices for spelling and literacy. He brings that wide exposure to this discussion of the best practices for spelling.  
  
**1. How important is spelling?**  
  
Over the past decade when spelling education seemed to fall out of favor, teachers, administrators, and parents all across the nation learned just how important spelling is for literacy education. The proof was in the classroom! In places where teachers stopped paying attention to spelling, test scores dropped and schools began to experience failure with literacy education (Colvin, 1995).  
  
  
In places where spelling instruction changed in ways that conveyed to parents that teachers didn't think spelling mattered, there were negative political results.  
  
  
We've seen a backlash in many school districts where parents are now making demands for spelling and phonics instruction (Routman, 1996). Over the last decade I think we've learned that spelling really does matter and that, as educators, we need to teach it. Let me discuss at least two areas where I think spelling is critically important.  
  
Spelling and emergent literacy  
  
Spelling is important for emergent literacy. Suppose I asked you to tell me the two kinds of knowledge that predict success with reading. That is, what kinds of knowledge would you want every first grader to have in the beginning of his or her first grade year because this knowledge is causally related to learning to read. The answer would be knowledge of the alphabet and phonemic awareness--in other words, kindergarten and first grade spelling! It's only fairly recently that research has provided this important insight (Richgels, 1995; Stanovich, 1994). In an often cited article on this topic, the eminent reading researcher, Keith Stanovich, recommends "appropriately chosen direct instruction in the spelling-sound code" (1994, p. 287). He is expressing the critical importance of spelling for emergent literacy. While teaching spelling is only one small part of literacy instruction, it is a necessary, but not sufficient, aspect of learning to read. This means focusing instructionally on spelling is important.  
  
Spelling and later literacy development  
  
I believe we're coming to know a greater importance of spelling for other aspects of literacy development--particularly reading and writing at later stages. Along with a number of other spelling researchers (Bear, 1992; Gentry and Gillet, 1993; Gill, 1992; Henderson, 1990; Hughes and Searle, 1991; Templeton, 1992; Zutell, 1992), I believe spelling and word study cut across the curriculum to make important contributions to reading, writing, and spoken language development, as well as vocabulary and concept development in the content areas.  
  
  
Of course students develop much of their spelling knowledge from reading and writing (Goodman, 1993; Laminack and Wood, 1996; Smith, 1978, 1983; Wilde, 1992). All classrooms should be reading/writing classrooms. But children also benefit from word study. Word study and spelling enhance students' reading fluency, writing fluency, correctness in pronunciation, vocabulary, clarity in thinking, and spelling accuracy as a courtesy to other readers. While no one would dispute that inspecting words should ensue from students' writing (Laminack and Wood, 1996), I agree with spelling researcher Shane Templeton who says "spelling knowledge also grows out of examining words in and of themselves" (Templeton, 1992). To me, this is an important aspect of balanced literacy instruction. Since spelling is important, it makes sense to me that some focus on spelling and word study be part of students' everyday activity.  
  
**2. What is the best way to teach spelling?**  
  
There are lots of ways to teach spelling!  
  
  
I can tell you this--there is no one, simple way. Spelling is much too complex for that. I believe teaching spelling is something that can best be accomplished gradually, step-by-step, day-by-day, year-by-year, based on substance and process. It's not quick, incidental, or easy.  
  
  
There are some important basic principles that underlie the best spelling practice. Those include paying attention to developmental aspects of learning to spell, individualizing spelling instruction, recognizing that individuals have differing capacities for spelling expertise, always connecting spelling to writing and reading, and building better spelling habits in young writers.  
  
  
Recently there has been much reported about the efficacy of literacy programs where writing is the focus and spelling is studied "in use" (Laminack and Wood, 1996). When teachers have established routines for teaching spelling and know a great deal about developmentally appropriate spelling content and word study, I believe focusing on writing and teaching spelling in use is a great way to teach spelling. I've seen this approach used effectively, especially in first and second grade classrooms. However, let me discuss a couple of caveats.  
  
  
The recent trend to develop literacy programs in which writing is the focus and spelling is studied in use began with the unsubstantiated theory that if children were readers and writers, teachers really didn't have to do very much to teach spelling. Theoretically, adults ultimately "caught" expert spelling by reading (Smith, 1978, 1983). While it's true that we learn a lot of what we know about spelling from reading and writing, I think we now know that for many children spelling is not caught-it must be taught. Certainly we know from research, and from experience in the classroom, that for many children reading and writing alone are not sufficient for learning to spell (Hughes and Searle, 1996). For me, one of the most enlightening research treatments of this topic is Margaret Peters' little classic, Spelling: Caught or Taught. Most people don't realize that the incidental versus systematic teaching of spelling controversy has been going on for over a century (Peters, 1985). Rice's 1897 article, "The Futility of the Spelling Grind," shows the "caught" theory has been around for over 100 years!  
  
  
The second caveat relates to the unknowns in classrooms in which writing is the focus and spelling is studied in use. In some ways it's like the trend to seek out one of those super-drug cure-alls that has not been tested. The scenario has a familiar ring: Test tube and animal studies show positive results. The drug works with rats. Perhaps in a few small studies people taking moderate doses report benefits. But no one really knows the correct dosage or if effects in rats will equate to effects in humans. There is too much uncertainty and too many long-term risks.  
  
  
While programs in which writing is the focus and spelling is studied in use sound appealing, a lot of questions remain to be answered before I could wholeheartedly recommend them across the board. What percentage of children who become expert spellers do not require systematic spelling study? What classroom conditions support these children? How much time should be spent teaching spelling as one focuses on writing? After children learn the first 2,000 most frequently used words, and learning to spell becomes more specialized, is more word study needed to assist upper elementary writers? Which activities or strategies work best? Do the strategies that work with second graders work at all grade levels? What does one do with the struggling speller?  
  
  
None of these questions has been dealt with sufficiently. As you can see, I still have some reservations about simply focusing on writing and teaching spelling in use. I believe more staff development, curricular guidelines, teaching strategies and routines, and teacher resources must be made available for teachers who try this approach.  
  
  
Then there are the pitfalls of the spelling--in-use approach. When I visit classrooms in which the focus is exclusively on writing, I find too many pitfalls--some voiced by teachers.Here are just a few:

* Some teachers don't think spelling is important.
* Some teachers think students learn to spell on their own.
* Some teachers do not spend much time dealing with spelling.
* Some teachers spend too much time dealing with spelling.
* Some teachers don't use resources for spelling--it's all in their heads.
* Some teachers don't encourage or facilitate word study.
* Some teachers have students generate all of their own spelling principles and spelling rules. It's like having someone learn to use a computer from trial and error when it's much easier to learn computing with a little instruction or a manual.
* Some teachers couldn't tell you about each individual student in their classrooms as a speller. For example, they couldn't tell you students' spelling levels or whether or not students were making progress.
* Some teachers reported they didn't know how to help struggling spellers.
* Some teachers reported spelling was hit or miss in their classroom.

I believe much needs to be done to address these pitfalls before we espouse theories about focusing on writing and teaching spelling in use. I'm all for change. But I think children come first. We must pay attention to what we see happening to children in our classrooms, we must pay attention to research, and we must minimize harm before we change without knowing the effects of what we are doing.  
  
**3. Should teachers use basal spellers?**  
  
It depends--on the basal, on the teacher, on the students. I do believe teachers need resources for teaching spelling. If I were in the classroom, I would like a good basal spelling text as a resource for teaching spelling. Beginning teachers need these kinds of resources. Teachers who have moved to a new grade level and are working with writers at developmental levels that are unfamiliar to the teacher need resources. Teachers who haven't received extensive training in how to teach spelling need resources. A good spelling basal is simply a teaching resource.  
  
  
Unfortunately all spelling basals aren't good. There are basal spelling programs that I do not recommend. I don't support basals that turn spelling study into drudgery. I am not in favor of pointless drills and rote memorization.  
  
  
No matter how spelling is taught, students should be readers and writers. That's a prerequisite for spelling development. If teachers have basal spelling texts as a resource, the texts should be research-based, flexible, and allow for teacher choice. There are basals that allow children to choose some words from their writing and develop individual word lists. I like those best. I like basals that provide for student choice, student collaboration, and spelling content that relates directly to what individual students are doing in their writing. The reading/writing connection is extremely important. Good basals provide lots of resources for students and for teachers--words, patterns, word sorts, strategies, word study options, routines for the classroom, spelling games--whatever students and teachers need to make word study engaging.  
  
**4. How does spelling emerge in very young children?**  
  
Early spelling emerges in developmental stages. It is very natural for the emerging speller to go through a "babbling" stage of spelling, a stage of abbreviated spelling (CT for cat), a stage of spelling by ear (EGL for eagle), and a stage of spelling by eye (FRIDE for fried) (Gentry, 1996). These stages are the foundation of later spelling competency (Gentry, 1987; Gentry and Gillet, 1993; Wilde, 1992).  
  
  
Developmental spelling is sometimes referred to as "invented spelling," which is the same as "temporary spelling," "creative spelling," or "sound spelling." The term "invented" comes from Piaget whose theory showed how children "reinvent language" as they go through the constructive, developmental process of learning to speak.  
  
  
Children have always used developmental spelling before they fully developed spelling competency. If you looked at samples of your own writing from when you were six years old, you would very likely see examples of temporary spelling. These stages of temporary spelling are very similar to the natural stages of spoken language that occur before young children can speak like adults--babbling, one word utterances, and two words used in a phrase like "all-gone milk." Just as children temporarily use this kind of speech in the process of constructing spoken language, they should use stages of temporary spelling.  
  
  
Teachers should encourage temporary spelling in the appropriate context, but they should also teach spelling. For many children, temporary spelling alone is not enough. While children do need to be encouraged to use temporary spelling, at the same time, correct spelling needs to be taught. The two should develop hand-in-hand.  
  
  
**5. What are some important points to remember about teaching spelling?**  
  
I think it's important to remember that, for many children, spelling must be taught (Gentry, 1996). It's important to remember that spelling must be individualized. Spelling cuts across the curriculum. It should be connected to writing and reading. The goal of a spelling program should be to develop writers and readers who have spelling consciousness (Hillerich, 1977) and good spelling habits.  
  
  
It's easy to judge if a good spelling program is part of an elementary classroom. Simply ask, "Are children in this classroom engaged in the spelling process: finding words, inspecting words, mastering words, and developing good spelling habits?" (Gentry, 1995). I believe that children should be finding unknown spelling words each week and using those words when they write. They should be actively engaged in mastering the spellings of those words. Each week students should have opportunities for word study that will help them learn the patterns of English spelling. Each week writers should be paying attention to spelling in their writing and developing better spelling habits.  
  
  
Spelling matters. It makes sense to pay a lot of attention to things that matter in the education and development of children.  
  
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